

THE SHEPHERD WHO WATCHED BY NIGHT



THOMAS NELSON PAGE

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**THE SHEPHERD WHO
WATCHED BY NIGHT**



"What are you doing here?" he asked

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THE SHEPHERD WHO WATCHED BY NIGHT

BY
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BY NIGHT

The Shepherd Who Watched by Night

THE place had nothing distinguished or even perhaps distinctive about it except its trees and the tapering spire of a church lifting above them. It was not unlike a hundred other places that one sees as one travels through the country. It called itself a town but it was hardly more than a village. One long street, now paved on both sides, climbed the hill, where the old post-road used to run in from the country on one side and out again on the other, passing a dingy, large house with white-washed pillars, formerly known as

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the tavern, but now calling itself "The Inn." This, with two or three built-up cross streets and a short street or two on either side of the main street, constituted "the town." A number of good houses, and a few very good indeed, sat back in yards dignified by fine trees. Three or four churches stood on corners, as far apart apparently as possible. Several of them were much newer and fresher painted than the one with the spire and cross; but this was the only old one and was generally spoken of as "The Church," as the rector was meant when the people spoke of "The Preacher." It sat back from the street, and near it, yet more retired, was an old dwelling, also dilapidated, with a wide porch, much decayed, and

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an out-building or two to the side and a little behind it, one of which was also occupied as a dwelling. The former was the rectory and the smaller dwelling was where the old woman lived who took care of the rectory, cleaned up the two rooms which the rector used since his wife's death, and furnished him his meals. It had begun only as a temporary arrangement, but it had seemed to work well enough and had gone on now for years and no one thought of changing it. If an idea of change ever entered the mind of any one, it was only when the old woman's grumbling floated out into the town as to the tramps who would come and whom the preacher would try to take care of. Then, indeed, discussion would take place as to the

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utter impracticability of the old preacher and the possibility of getting a younger and livelier man in his place. For the rest of the time the people were hopeless. The old preacher was past his prime; no one else wanted him, and they could not turn him out. He was saddled on them for life. They ran simply by the old propulsion; but the church was going down, they said, and they were helpless. This had been the case for years. And now as the year neared its close it was the same.

Such was the talk as they finished dressing the church for Christmas and made their way homeward, the few who still took interest enough to help in this way. They felt sorry for the old man, who had been

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much in their way during the dressing, but sorrier for themselves. This had been a few days before Christmas and now it was Christmas eve.

The old rector sat at his table trying to write his Christmas sermon. He was hopelessly behindhand with it. The table was drawn up close to the worn stove, but the little bare room was cold, and now and then the old man blew on his fingers to warm them, and pushed his feet closer to the black hearth. Again and again he took up his pen as if to write, and as often laid it down again. The weather was bitter and the coal would not burn. There was little to burn. Before him on the table, amid a litter of other books and papers, lay a worn bible and prayer-book—open, and beside them

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a folded letter on which his eye often rested. Outside, the wind roared, shaking the doors, rattling the windows, and whistling at the key-holes. Now and then the sound of a passing vehicle was borne in on the wind, and at intervals came the voices of boys shouting to each other as they ran by. The old man did not hear the former, but when the boys shouted he listened till they had ceased and his thoughts turned to the past and to the two boys whom God had given him and had then taken back to Himself. His gray face wore a look of deep concern, and, indeed, of dejection, and his eye wandered once more to the folded letter on the table. It was signed "A Friend," and it was this which was responsible for the

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unwritten Christmas sermon. It was what the world calls an anonymous letter and, though couched in kindly terms, it had struck a dagger into the old man's heart. And yet he could not but say that in tone and manner it was a kind act. Certainly it had told the truth and, if in tearing a veil from his eyes it had stunned him, why should he not face the truth!

He took up the letter again and reread it, not that he needed to read it, for he knew it by heart.

He reread it hoping to find some answer to its plain, blunt, true statements, but he found none. It was all true, every word, from the ominous beginning which stated that the writer felt that he had "a clear duty to perform," down to the close

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when with a protestation of goodwill he signed himself the old man's "friend."

"You must see, unless you are blind," ran the letter, "that your church is running down, and unless you get out and let the congregation secure a new and younger man, there will soon be no congregation at all left. No men come to church any longer and many women who used to come now stay away. You are a good man, but you are a failure. Your usefulness is past."

Yes, it was true, he was a failure. His usefulness was past. This was the reason no Christmas things had come this year—they wanted to let him know. It pained him to think it, and he sighed.

"You spend your time fooling

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about a lot of useless things, visiting people who do not come to church, and you have turned the rectory into a harbor for tramps," continued the anonymous friend.

"You cannot preach any longer. You are hopelessly behind the times. People nowadays want no more doctrinal points discussed; they want to hear live, up-to-date, practical discourses on the vital problems of the day—such as the Rev. Dr. —— delivers. His church is full." This also was true. He was no longer able to preach. He had felt something of this himself. Now it came home to him like a blow on the head, and a deeper pain was the conviction which, long hovering about his heart, now settled and took definite shape, that he ought

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to get out. But where could he go? He would have gone long since if he had known where to go. He could not go out and graze like an old horse on the roadside. There was no provision made for those like him. No pensions were provided by his church for old and disabled clergymen, and the suggestion made in the letter had no foundation in his case. It ran, "You must or, at least, you should have saved something in all this time."

This sounded almost humorous, and a wintry little smile flickered for a moment about the old man's wrinkled mouth. His salary had never been a thousand dollars, and there were so many to give to. Of late, it had been less than two-thirds of this amount and not all

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of this had been paid. The smile died out and the old man's face grew grave again as he tried to figure out what he could do. He thought of one or two old friends to whom he could write. Possibly, they might know of some country parish that would be willing to take him, though it was a forlorn hope. If he could but hold on till they invited him, it would be easier, for he knew how difficult it was for a clergyman out of a place to get a call. People were so suspicious. Once out, he was lost.

At the thought, a picture of a little plot amid the trees in the small cemetery on the hill near the town slipped into his mind. Three little slabs stood there above three mounds, one longer than the others.

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They covered all that was mortal of what he had loved best on earth. The old man sighed and his face in the dim light took on an expression very far away. He drifted off into a reverie. Ah, if they had only been left to him, the two boys that God had sent him and had then taken back to Himself, and the good wife who had borne up so bravely till she had sunk by the wayside! If he were only with them! He used to be rebellious at the neglect that left the drains so deadly, but that was gone now. He leant forward on his elbows and gradually slipped slowly to his knees. He was on them a long time, and when he tried to rise he was quite stiff; but his face had grown tranquil. He had been in high converse with the

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blessed of God and his mind had cleared. He had placed everything in God's hands, and He had given him light. He would wait until after Christmas and then he would resign. But he would announce it next day. The flock there should have a new and younger and abler shepherd. This would be glad tidings to them.

He folded up the letter and put it away. He no longer felt wounded by it. It was of God's ordaining and was to be received as a kindness, a ray of light to show him the path of duty. He drew his paper toward him and, taking up his pen, began to write rapidly and firmly. The doubt was gone, the way was clear. His text had come to his mind.

“And there were in the same coun-

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try, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger."

Unfolding the story, he told of the darkness that had settled over Israel under the Roman sway and the formalism of the Jewish hierarchy at the time of Christ's coming, draw-

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ing from it the lesson that God still had shepherds watching over His flocks in the night to whom He vouchsafed to send His heavenly messengers. On and on he wrote, picturing the divine mission of the Redeemer and His power to save souls, and dwelling on Christmas as the ever-recurrent reminder of "the tender mercy of our God whereby the Day Spring from on High hath visited us."

Suddenly he came to a pause. Something troubled him. It flashed over him that he had heard that a woman in the town was very sick and he had intended going to see her. She had had a bad reputation; but he had heard that she had reformed. At any rate she was ill. He paused and deliberated. At the

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moment the wind rattled the shutters. She did not belong to his flock or, so far as he knew, to any flock, and once when he had stopped her on the street and spoken to her of her evil life, she had insulted him.

He turned back to his paper, pen in hand; but it was borne in on him that he was writing of watching over the flock by night and here he was neglecting one of his Father's sheep. He laid aside his pen and, rising, took down his old overcoat and hat and stick, lit his lantern, turned down his lamp, and shuffling through the bare, narrow passage, let himself out at the door.

As he came out on to the little porch to step down to the walk, the wind struck him fiercely and he had some difficulty in fastening the door

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with its loose lock; but this done he pushed forward. The black trees swayed and creaked above him in the high night wind, and fine particles of snow stung his withered cheeks. He wondered if the shepherds in the fields ever had such a night as this for their watch. He remembered to have read that snow fell on the mountains of Judæa.

At length he reached the little house on a back street where he had heard the sick woman lived. A light glimmered dimly in an upper window and his knocking finally brought to the door a woman who looked after her. She was not in a good humor at being disturbed at that hour, for her rest had been much broken of late; but she was civil and invited him in.

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In answer to his question of how her patient was, she replied gloomily: "No better; the doctor says she can't last much longer. Do you want to see her?" she added presently.

The old rector said he did, and she waved toward the stair. "You can walk up."

As they climbed the stair she added: "She said you'd come if you knew." The words made the old man warmer. And when she opened the door of the sick room and said, "Here's the preacher, as you said," the faint voice of the invalid murmuring, "I hoped you'd come," made him feel yet warmer.

He was still of some use even in this parish.

Whatever her face had been in the past, illness and suffering had re-

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fined it. He stayed there long, for he found that she needed him. She unburdened herself to him. She was sorry she had been rude to him that time. She had been a sinful woman. She said she had tried of late to live a good life, since that day he had spoken to her, but she now found that she had not. She had wanted to be a believer and she had gone to hear him preach one day after that, but now she did not seem to believe anything. She wanted to repent, but she could not feel. She was in the dark, and she feared she was lost.

The old man had taken his seat by her side, and he now held her hand and soothed her tenderly.

“Once, perhaps,” he said doubtfully, “though God only knows that,

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but certainly no longer. Christ died for you. You say you wanted to change, that you tried to ask God's pardon and to live a better life even before you fell ill. Do you think you could want this as much as God wanted it? He put the wish into your heart. Do you think He would now let you remain lost? Why, He sent His Son into the world to seek and to save the lost. He has sent me to you to-night to tell you that He has come to save you. It is not you that can save yourself, but He, and if you feel that it is dark about you, never mind—the path is still there. One of the old Fathers has said that God sometimes puts His children to sleep in the dark. He not only forgave the Magdalen for her love of Him, but

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He vouchsafed to her the first sight of his face after His resurrection."

"I see," she said simply.

A little later she dozed off, but presently roused up again. A bell was ringing somewhere in the distance. It was the ushering in of the Christmas morn.

"What is that?" she asked feebly.

He told her.

"I think if I were well, if I could ever be good enough, I should like to join the church," she said. "I remember being baptized—long ago."

"You have joined it," he replied.

Just then the nurse brought her a glass.

"What is that?" she asked feebly.

"A little wine." She held up a bottle in which a small quantity remained.

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It seemed to the old preacher a sort of answer to his thought. "Have you bread here?" he asked the young woman. She went out and a moment later brought him a piece of bread.

He had often administered the early communion on Christmas morning, but never remembered a celebration that had seemed to him so real and satisfying. As he thought of the saints departed this life in the faith and fear of the Lord, they appeared to throng about him as never before, and among them were the faces he had known and loved best on earth.

It was toward morning when he left. As he bade her good-by he knew he should see her no more this side of heaven.

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As he came out into the night the snow was falling softly, but the wind had died down and he no longer felt cold. The street was empty, but he no longer felt lonely. He seemed to have got nearer to God's throne.

Suddenly, as he neared his house, a sound fell on his ears. He stopped short and listened. Could he have been mistaken? Could that have been a baby's cry? There was no dwelling near but his own, and on that side only the old and unoccupied stable in the yard whence the sound had seemed to come. A glance at it showed that it was dark and he was moving on again to the house when the sound was repeated. This time there was no doubt of it. A baby's wail came clear on the silence

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of the night from the unused stable. A thought that it might be some poor foundling flashed into his mind. The old man turned and, stumbling across the yard, went to the door.

“Who is here?” he asked of the dark. There was no answer, but the child wailed again, and he entered the dark building, asking again, “Who is here?” as he groped his way forward. This time a voice almost inarticulate answered. Holding his dim little lantern above his head, he made his way inside, peering into the darkness, and presently, in a stall, on a lot of old litter, he descried a dark and shapeless mass from which the sound came. Moving forward, he bent down, with the lantern held low, and the dark mass gradually took shape as a woman’s

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form seated on the straw. A patch of white, from which a pair of eyes gazed up at him, became a face, and below, a small bundle clasped to her breast took on the lines of a babe.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, breathless with astonishment. She shook her head wearily, and her lips moved as if to say: “I didn’t mean any harm.” But no sound came. She only tried to fold the babe more warmly in her shawl. He took off his overcoat and wrapped it around her. “Come,” he said firmly. “You must come with me,” he added kindly; then, as she did not rise, he put out his hand to lift her, but, instead, suddenly set down the lantern and took the babe gently in his arms. She let him take the child, and rose slowly, her eyes still

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on him. He motioned for her to take the lantern and she did so. And they came to the door. He turned up the walk, the babe in his arms, and she going before him with the lantern. The ground was softly carpeted with snow; the wind had died down, but the clouds had disappeared and the trees were all white, softly gleaming, like dream-trees in a dreamland. The old man shivered slightly, but not now with cold. He felt as if he had gone back and held once more in his arms one of those babes he had given back to God. He thought of the shepherds who watched by night on the Judæan hills. "It must have been such a night as this," he thought, as his eyes caught the morning star, which appeared to rest just over his home.

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When they reached his door he saw that some one had been there in his absence. A large box stood on the little porch and beside it a basket filled with things. So he had not been forgotten after all. The milkman also had called, and for his customary small bottle of milk had left one of double the usual size. When he let himself in at the door, he took the milk with him. So the shepherds might have done, he thought.

It was long before he could get the fire to burn; but in time this was done; the room was warm and the milk was warmed also. The baby was quieted and was soon asleep in its mother's lap, where she sat, still hooded, before the stove. And as the firelight fell from the open stove

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on the child, in its mother's arms, the old man thought of a little picture he had once seen in a shop window. He had wanted to buy it, but he had never felt that he could gratify such a taste. There were too many calls on him. Then, as the young woman appeared overcome with fatigue, the old man put her with the child in the only bed in the house that was ready for an occupant and, returning to the little living-room, ensconced himself in his arm-chair by the stove. He had meant to finish his sermon, but he was conscious for the first time that he was very tired; but he was also very happy. When he awoke he found that it was quite late. He had overslept and though his breakfast had been set out for him, he had

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time only to make his toilet and to go to church. The mother and child were still asleep in his room, the babe folded in her arm, and he stopped only to gaze on them a moment and to set the rest of the milk and his breakfast where the young mother could find it on awaking. Then he went to church, taking his half-finished sermon in his worn case. He thought with some dismay that it was unfinished, but the memory of the poor woman and the midnight communion, and of the young mother and her babe, comforted him; so he plodded on bravely. When he reached the church it was nearly full. He had not had such a congregation in a long time. And they were all cheerful and happy. The pang he had had as he

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remembered that he was to announce his resignation that day was renewed, but only for a second. The thought of the babe and its mother, warmed and fed in his little home, drove it away. And soon he began the service.

He had never had such a service. It all appeared to him to have a new meaning. He felt nearer to the people in the pews than he ever remembered to have felt. They were more than ever his flock and he more than ever their shepherd. More, he felt nearer to mankind, and yet more near to those who had gone before—the innumerable company of the redeemed. They were all about him, clad all in white, glistening like the sun. The heavens seemed full of them. When he turned

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his eyes to the window, the whole earth seemed white with them. The singing sounded in his ears like the choiring of angels. He was now in a maze. He forgot the notice he had meant to give and went straight into his sermon, stumbling a little as he climbed the steps to the pulpit. He repeated the text and kept straight on. He told the story of the shepherds in the fields watching their flocks when the Angel of the Lord came upon them and told of the Babe in the manger who was Christ the Lord. He spoke for the shepherds. He pictured the shepherds watching through the night and made a plea for their loneliness and the hardship of their lives. They were very poor and ignorant. But they had to watch the flock

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and God had chosen them to be His messengers. The wise men would come later, but now it was the shepherds who first knew of the birth of Christ the Lord. He was not reading as was his wont. It was all out of his heart and the eyes of all seemed to be on him—of all in pews and of all that innumerable white-clad host about him.

He was not altogether coherent, for he at times appeared to confuse himself with the shepherds. He spoke as if the message had come to him, and after a while he talked of some experiences he had had in finding a child in a stable. He spoke as though he had really seen it. "And now," he said, "this old shepherd must leave his flock, the message has come for him."

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He paused and looked down at his sermon and turned the leaves slowly, at first carefully and then almost aimlessly. A breath of wind blew in and a few leaves slid off the desk and fluttered down to the floor.

“I have been in some fear lately,” he said, “but God has appeared to make the way plain. A friend has helped me, and I thank him.” He looked around and lost himself. “I seem to have come to the end,” he said, smiling simply with a soft, childish expression stealing over and lighting up his wan face. “I had something more I wanted to say, but I can’t find it and—I can’t remember. I seem too tired to remember it. I am a very old man and you must bear with me, please, while I try.” He quietly turned and

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walked down the steps, holding on to the railing.

As he stooped to pick up a loose sheet from the floor, he sank to his knees, but he picked it up. "Here it is," he said with a tone of relief. "I remember now. It is that there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, and the light came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid, and the angel said unto them: 'Fear not, for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord.'"

They reached him as he sank down and, lifting him, placed him on a

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cushion taken from a pew. He was babbling softly of a babe in a stable and of the glory of the Lord that shone round about them. "Don't you hear them singing?" he said. "You must sing too; we must all join them."

At the suggestion of some one, a woman's clear voice struck up,

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night,"

and they sang it through as well as they could for sobbing. But before the hymn was ended the old shepherd had joined the heavenly choir and had gone away up into heaven.

As they laid him in the little chamber on the hill opening to the sunrise, the look on his face showed

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that the name of that chamber was Peace.

They talk of him still in his old parish—of the good he did, and of his peaceful death on the day that of all the year signified Birth and Life.

Nothing was ever known of the mother and babe. Only there was a rumor that one had been seen leaving the house during the morning and passing out into the white-clad country. And at the little inn in the town there was vague wonder what had become of the woman and her baby who had applied for shelter there the night before and had been told that there was no place for her there, and that she had better go to the old preacher, as he took in

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all the tramps. But in heaven it is known that there was that Christmas eve a shepherd who kept watch over his flock by night.

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